



Advocacy Strategies to make Your IEP more Effective

The IEP (*Individualized Education Plan*) is a legally mandated document that when written correctly, should address how a child's special needs will be accommodated in the child's LRE (*Least Restrictive Environment*). An effective IEP is a well-negotiated document that requires a team approach in determining what specialized services, adaptations and modifications may be needed to enable your child to make progress in their appropriate school placement.

Prior to the IEP: Lay the groundwork

Golden Rule—Always prepare for the IEP

- Gather information prior to the meeting. Use school records, examples of your child's work, outside evaluations, and all pertinent information.
- Build relationships with school staff and discuss concerns prior to the meeting. It is good practice to visit the school and the program they offer. Maintain these relationships and build support by being open to ideas. Know who will resist your suggestions and decide what is negotiable. Remember school environments are also political environments. Know who has the real power to offer services, programs and placements.
- Get a copy of a blank IEP form and work on the sections that involve specific parental statements. When developing a parental vision statement, state the need for increased communication and teamwork across all academic, non-academic and extracurricular areas. Study them closely.
- When stating the strengths of your child also remember to address concerns over their ability to participate in outside activities, problems transitioning from one activity to another and how these different parts of your child's life impact upon each other.
- State your concerns over school-based problems like irregular provision of services, safety issues, failure to provide assistive technology. Has there been a lack of academic progress? This is also a good time to discuss independent evaluations and the need for further assessment.
- If you need a native language and or sign language interpreter, make sure you request one prior to the meeting; the school must provide you with one that speaks or signs in your native language.

- Make sure that both the regular and special education teacher will attend the IEP meeting and will develop collaborative strategies to work with each other within an integrated curriculum. Placement (Least Restrictive Environment) determination should not be made prior to the IEP meeting and should not be based solely on what services are currently available.
- To what extent can the student participate in classroom activities with her/his non-disabled peers? Consider problems and barriers that may arise and propose solutions. Consider modifications and accommodations to classroom activities. Have an idea of the appropriate timelines that you want written into the IEP.
- It is crucial that you know whether teachers are using standardized testing or alternate assessment to measure your child's progress. If you don't know or understand these methods, schedule a meeting with the respective teachers to discuss them.
- Obtain information on Assistive Technology (A.T.) evaluations, as mandated by IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act). You'll never know if your child may benefit from the use of A.T. without having them evaluated. Get copies of any guidelines that the school may be using to determine the need for modifications and adaptations.
- Never go to an IEP meeting alone! Bring a friend, relative, or advocate. Make sure you write down your goal(s). Know exactly what your child needs.

At the IEP Meeting: Carry out a plan

Golden rule — Develop and Implement strategies

- Be *assertive* rather than *aggressive* get an update and always clarify the purpose of the meeting. Know the issues and listen carefully. Ask questions. Many times you'll hear negative feedback. Don't over react. A negative reaction will not help you maintain the focus on your child's needs. Channel your anger constructively and learn from past mistakes.
- Keep focused on your goal. How is new information affecting your strategy? Will your strategy need to change? Are there any more questions you need to ask? Take a break from the meeting to consult with someone or just to collect your thoughts. Keep a lid on disagreements by agreeing to disagree for the moment. Conflict can be good when used to negotiate a better solution.
- Make sure that all goals and objectives are reasonable and measurable. If percentages are used to measure progress, then make sure that you understand the teacher's method of assessing these percentages. Many times "observe" is the only box checked

off on the IEP. Make sure that other methods are used like, “portfolios, charts, alternative testing, etc.”

- Make sure that the dates to reevaluate services and progress are clearly stated in your child’s IEP goals and objectives. Make sure that the goals and objectives relate to the current levels of performance and that progress is accounted for at every IEP review meeting.
- If there have been behavior problems, make sure that all incidents have been reported to you in writing. The IEP team must consider behaviors such as problems concentrating, focusing, and distractibility. A child does not have to be classified as behavior disordered in order to receive a functional analysis and a behavior management plan. Make sure the behavior management plan is consistently implemented in all instructional areas of the child’s learning environment. Everybody should be on the same page.
- Know the structure of your child’s educational day. How do the modes of instruction that work best for your child, i.e.; auditory, visual, kinesthetic, fit in with the overall learning environment? Visit the classroom. How is the student’s workspace organized? Ask to see and evaluate the classroom curriculum. Always make suggestions throughout the entire meeting. Assure the school that you will participate in the implementation and monitoring of services.
- Make sure your child has clearly defined modifications and accommodations. Who is responsible for implementing them? Will additional assessments be required? Request that school personnel be trained in your child’s area of need, i.e.; **Training in “Characteristics of the Autistic Child” will be provided for the school staff who work or may work with John.** Make sure that implementation timelines are written in.
- About the time your child begins high school, a transition plan should be developed. Learn more about transition plans and make sure your child has an active role in the process. **Transition planning should start when a child turns 14.** This represents a change in the former law which stated, *by the age of 16 or as early as 14 1/2.*

After the IEP is completed: Evaluate your plan

Golden rule — Always follow-up-reevaluate what worked well and what may have worked better

- Consider the option of taking your IEP home for 10 days and reexamining it, as well as writing your own goals and objectives if necessary. Then reconvene the IEP meeting. If, on the day of the IEP meeting you feel that the IEP is complete, then make sure you get your copies and copies of any assessments that you may not already have. Keep your IEP in a place you can refer to readily.

- ❑ Graduation with a regular H.S. diploma means termination of services under FAPE (*Free Appropriate Public Education*). Make sure that if your child receives a 'certificate of attendance' that his/her services are not terminated.
- ❑ Make sure that you and your child, if appropriate, understand the "age of majority notification". Decide prior to your child's 18th birthday whether or not you need to have guardianship of your child. Do a follow-up with the social worker or counselor if you have questions concerning the guardianship process.
- ❑ Schedule meetings with individual teachers and develop a way to communicate with them on a regular basis. Never agree to anything without informed consent and knowledge of your procedural safeguards.
- ❑ If there is no reasonable way to resolve a conflict, you always have the legal option of mediation or due process. Use these options only if you mean to see them through; the school will not take you seriously if you do not follow through on your decision. Document conversations regarding specific issues with dates and the names of who you spoke to. You can never be too prepared! If you need a lawyer, organize all your information into a neatly tabbed binder. A well presented case will greatly increase your chances of winning a dispute.
- ❑ Lastly, always seek training opportunities and join a parent support group. A parent support group will provide you with needed emotional support and you will get valuable feedback and information from other parents. You will also get a better idea of systemic issues and how they impact on other children with disabilities. Parent group meetings are a great place to compare strategies and share stories from the field!

If you are interested in joining a parent support group or you would like to share other advocacy strategies, please call or e-mail us at Designs for Change. Thank You

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